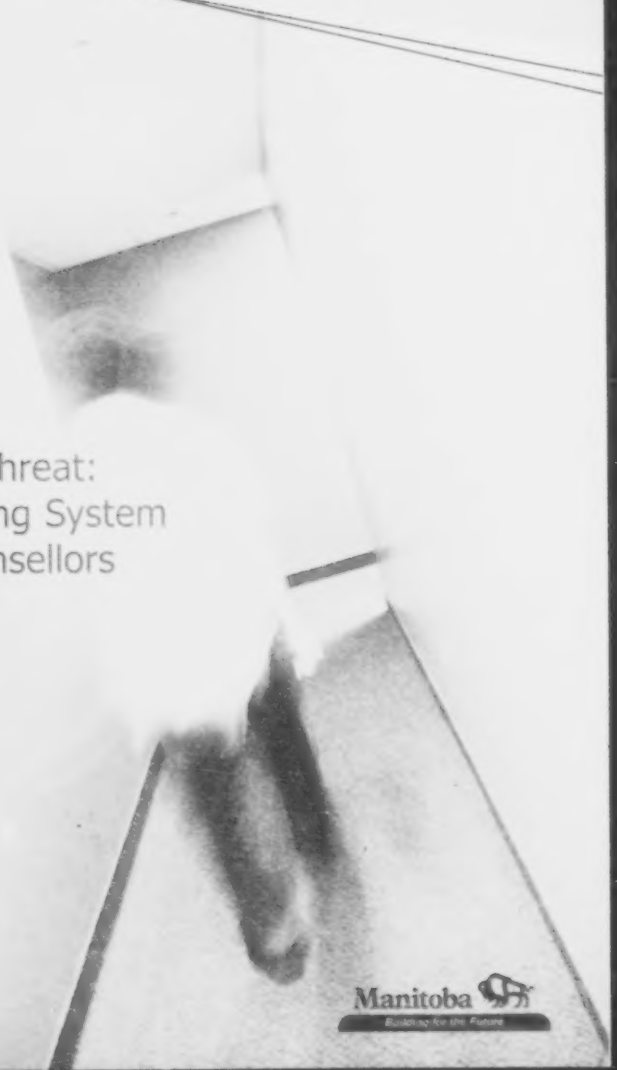
When Are Not **Enough**



Precursors to Threat:
An Early Warning System
for School Counsellors

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Introduction

You see him in the hall. Again.

The teacher is millimetres from his face. Crimson. Teacher words are pouring out of her mouth.

That unsettled feeling descends upon you. Something isn't right here. You never used to see this student in trouble. In the hallway. Out of class. Slouching like this.

Later, the teacher admits she's tried everything to reach "this kid." Nothing works. She's tried talking to him. Talking to his parents. Talking until she was hoarse. No amount of cajoling, encouraging, threatening, or demanding changes his behaviour. It wasn't always like this.

Sometimes, words are not enough. And often, actions speak louder than words.

When Words Are Not Enough is designed for trained school counsellors. Based on the threat assessment protocols developed by Kevin Cameron (2004), this booklet has been created as an early warning system that may increase early intervention to prevent, delay, or de-escalate impending behaviour that is threatening. The booklet focuses on behavioural indicators that often precede worrisome behaviour and prompt intervention by the Threat Assessment Team.

By listing the most likely markers of change, it is hoped that there will be increased opportunities for school counsellors to intervene with services for at-risk students who previously had been unidentified. As trained observers of human behaviour, educators often notice subtle cues that hint at change before it becomes so entrenched, severe, or destructive that the possibility of self-harm or harm to others is imminent. As trained interveners in human behaviour, school counsellors offer on-site supports, resources, and connections to agencies that provide protective and supportive services within and beyond the school.

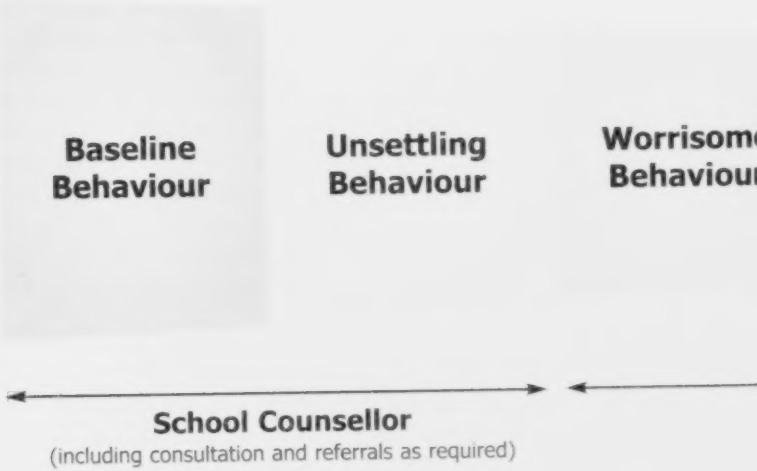
Established threat assessment protocols are essential to crisis intervention procedures that keep students safe while in our care. Multi-agency Threat Assessment Teams allow us to work together, using specialized skills when there is a perceived threat. Knowing the precursors to worrisome and threatening behaviour creates an early warning system that assists schools in providing prevention and early intervention services.

Focus on the Student: A Risk Continuum

If we have learned anything about human behaviour over the years, it is that it is complex; unique to individuals; affected by heredity, education, and environment; and constantly evolving. We are all "a work in progress." People change.

Assessing student behaviour in terms of risk levels and potential for threat to self or others requires specialized training. What doesn't require specialized training is being observant and caring.

The diagram below illustrates a risk continuum toward threatening behaviours. Typically, trained counsellors and clinicians intervene with students who have baseline indicators that affect their ability to live successful and happy lives, in



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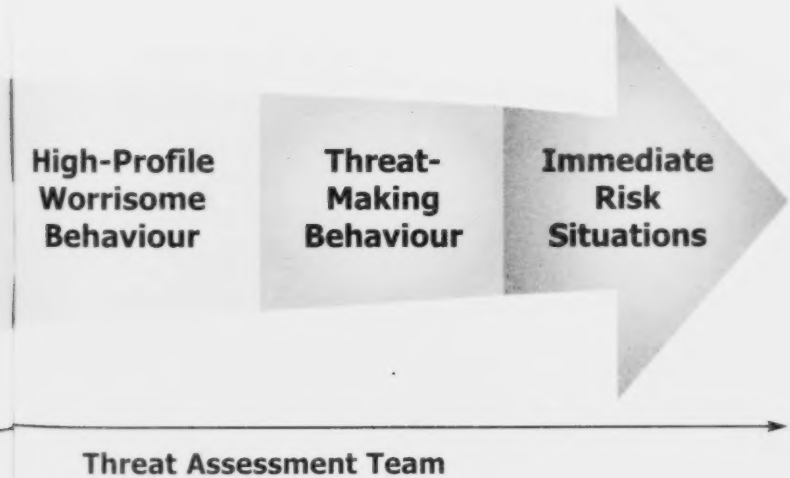
and beyond the school setting. Generally, responding to unsettling student behaviour is part of the regular duties of a counsellor or clinician in the school system.

Multi-agency Threat Assessment Teams typically respond to students who do not respond to counselling, and/or students who exhibit worrisome behaviours or behaviours that pose a perceived threat to themselves or others.

It is important to note that no list of indicators or risk continua fully describes students who may pose a threat to themselves or others. There is no magic list.

Note: This continuum is neither a checklist nor a predictive scale.



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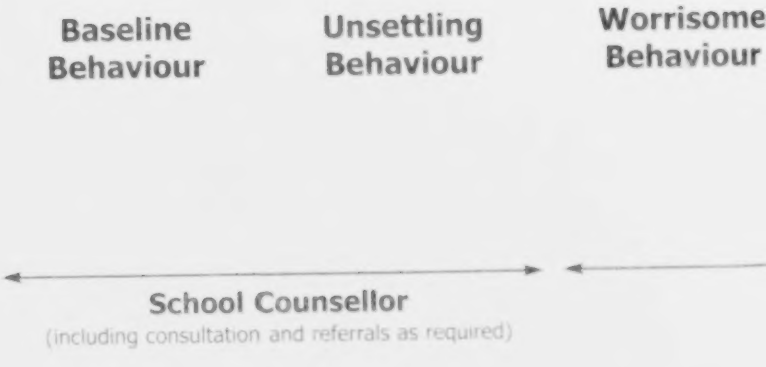

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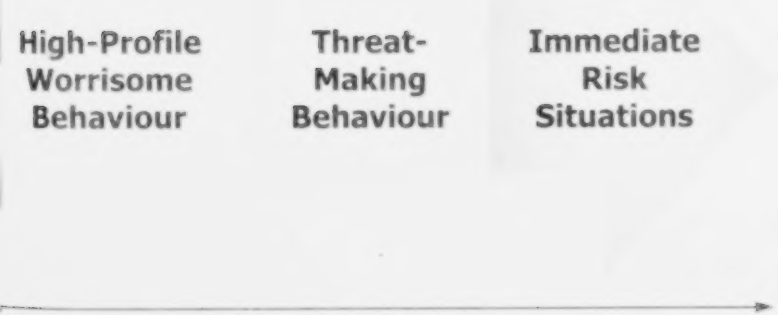


Dynamics of Behaviour

Human behaviour is complex. Determining which behaviours may indicate a threat to oneself or others is difficult. Some students show no outwardly visible hints to their internal motivations. Some students show an array of behaviours that clearly reveal intent toward harm. And some students show an array of behaviours that seem to reveal intent toward harm, but the students have no harmful intentions whatsoever. There is also fluidity between homicidal and suicidal intent, and there are contextual issues and personality factors that make it impossible to predict an individual's actions.

What *is* possible is to offer indicators that are frequently associated with risky or threatening behaviours. The chart on the following page illustrates common dynamics that may contribute to the likelihood of threatening or risk-taking behaviour. It is important to note that even when all of the dynamics listed on the chart are present, a student may not pose any harm at all. The list is not designed as a way to profile or stereotype behaviour. Rather, it is intended as a reminder of possible areas in which to search for further information.

Family Dynamics:

- Turbulent parent-child relationship
- Acceptance of pathological behaviour
- Access to weapons
- Lack of intimacy
- Student "rules the roost"
- No limits or monitoring of TV/Internet

School Dynamics:

- Detached from school
- Tolerance for disrespect
- Inequitable discipline
- Inflexible culture
- Student pecking order
- Code of silence
- Unsupervised computer access
- Unmonitored access to violent media, entertainment, technology
- Violent/extremist peer group
- Drug and alcohol use
- Violent/extreme outside interests
- Copycat effect

Baseline Behaviour

Clinical Diagnoses such as:
Conduct disorder
Oppositional Defiant disorder
ADD/ADHD
Mood disorders
Personality disorders
FAS/FAE
Psychopathology
Child abuse/neglect
Other

Undiagnosed/Unreported Factors

Personality Traits:
Frustration/tolerance levels
Coping skills
Resiliency levels
Connection/alienation
Empathy levels
Superiority/inferiority levels
Self-esteem
Trust levels
Humour/perspective
Rigidity
Violence levels/defiant behaviour
Bullying/bullied

Step 1: Observing Normal Patterns of Development

Most behaviour falls along a generally predictable path. Generally, as children gain in positive life experiences, age, and maturity, their behaviour reflects a pattern of evolution toward more sophisticated, independent, and self-sufficient choices. While every person is unique, the behaviours usually reflect socially acceptable choices that result in a gain of personal satisfaction.

From time to time, though, children and youth veer from this path and begin another path that is more negative and destructive in nature. We need to notice that change in direction. As trained counsellors, our job is to care, to intervene, and/or to seek additional supports to empower the young person to face the source underlying the change in typical behaviour, and to work toward a healthier, happier future.

The diagram to the left provides a list of features in a person's behaviour that are good indicators to aid in detecting change, and the direction of that change.

Unsettling Behaviour

Change In:
Baseline behaviour
Diagnostic symptoms
Social group
Life event
Academic function
Attendance
Behaviour
Violence levels
Activity levels
Family
Tolerance/stress
Attachment

Trauma/Tragedy

Humiliation/Shaming Event

Loss of Support

Increased:
Impulsivity
Self-deprecation
Risk-taking
Secrecy
Self-harm
Absenteeism/withdrawal
Preoccupation
Bullying
Attention-seeking behaviour

Home and School:
Concerned:
Peer(s)
Teacher(s)
Parent(s)

Step 2: Detecting Change

Patterns of development are unique to each individual. In detecting change, you are looking for changes in the typical pattern or "baseline" of a specific young person. When students begin to veer away from their normal baseline behaviour, take note. For instance, a student who normally accepts changes in daily events with ease, but suddenly becomes enraged over an unannounced test, would be moving away from his or her baseline behaviour. Moving away from the baseline becomes unsettling when the movement is toward less developmentally appropriate realms. Any student who becomes more withdrawn than normal, more aggressive than normal, more anxious than normal, and/or more defiant than normal—his or her 'baseline' normal—could benefit from counselling. The diagram to the left shows indicators that point toward more risky or threatening patterns. Remember, the items listed are not designed as a checklist or a predictive scale; they represent areas in which change may occur. They are listed as a means for focusing your attention.

Step 3: Intervening and Referring

School counsellors are uniquely positioned to intervene when unsettling behaviour is detected. Located within the school and familiar to students, counsellors have the ability to begin open, honest conversations with students, and to offer counselling services. Unless the counsellor has training in the specific area of concern, a referral to clinical services or external agencies should be made. If, once counselling has commenced, it is clear that the student's behaviour is escalating, consultation with the Threat Assessment Team is required.

Worrisome Behaviour

Change in baseline behaviour
Change in diagnostic symptoms
Unable to forget/forgive past perceived or real injustices
Behaviour appears relevant to carrying out a threat
Leakage (clues to impending violence)
Subtle threats
Subtle boasting
Fantasies
Attitudes/ultimatums
Thoughts/feelings
Low tolerance for frustration
Poor coping skills
Lack of resiliency
Failed love relationship
Unusual interest in sensational violence
Fascination with violence-filled entertainment
Signs of depression
Narcissism
Alienation
Dehumanizes others
Lack of empathy
Exaggerated sense of entitlement
Attitude of superiority
Exaggerated/pathological need for attention
Externalizes blame
Masks low self-esteem
Anger management problems
Intolerance
Inappropriate humour
Seeks to manipulate others
Lack of trust
Closed social group
Change in behaviour
Rigid/opinionated
Negative role models

Using Threat Assessment Protocols

Knowing threat assessment protocols and the continuum of indicators typically found in students with worrisome to threatening behaviour does not replace specific training in threat assessment, strategic interviewing, and trauma response.

A multi-disciplinary team approach enables professionals with unique training to work together in their areas of specialty to quickly determine the level of risk and/or threat.

Worrisome Behaviour

School counsellors, teachers, and principals are often the first adults to notice students who exhibit worrisome behaviour. Often, these students come to the attention of school staff because of disciplinary matters or breaches in the school's code of conduct. Prior to any decision to suspend or expel a student, it is critical that the opportunity is taken to determine the behavioural status of the student.

However, just as often, students who are exhibiting worrisome behaviour do not come to the attention of school staff because of disciplinary matters. Addressing worrisome behaviour begins with recognizing a change in baseline behaviour, combined with other personal indicators (as listed in the diagram to the left), or actively listening to other students who have noticed behaviours that fit with the characteristics of worrisome behaviour.

Mobilizing the Threat Assessment Team according to school- or school division-based protocols begins the process of increasing safety, and reducing or eliminating the possibility of threat.

High-Profile Worrisome Behaviour

Change in baseline behaviour

Change in diagnostic symptoms

Risk to self

Dangerous impulsivity

Possible risk to others

Subtle or generalized threats without a specific timeline, plan, or opportunity

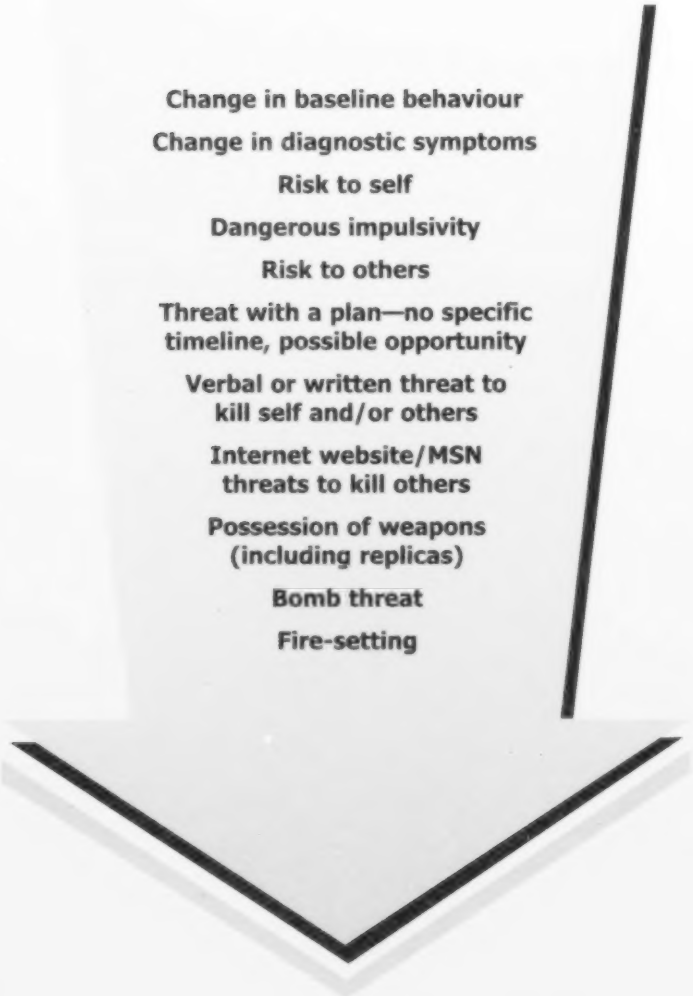
Elevated sensitivity of others to threat due to recent or local violent incident(s)

Probability of trauma for others based on over-reaction, echo-effect

Identifying high-profile worrisome behaviour begins with recognizing that the worrisome behaviour of a student, when combined with a heightened sensitivity in the school or community (as listed in the diagram to the left) or a highly visible or public setting, increases the possibility of trauma to other students or staff. It is the added dimension of the public nature of the behaviour, or the possible trauma associated with the behaviour, that causes the Threat Assessment Team to view high-profile worrisome behaviour as an exceptional case.

In high-profile worrisome behaviour situations, the school counsellor often is required to support students who may have been traumatized by witnessing events.

Threat-Making Behaviour

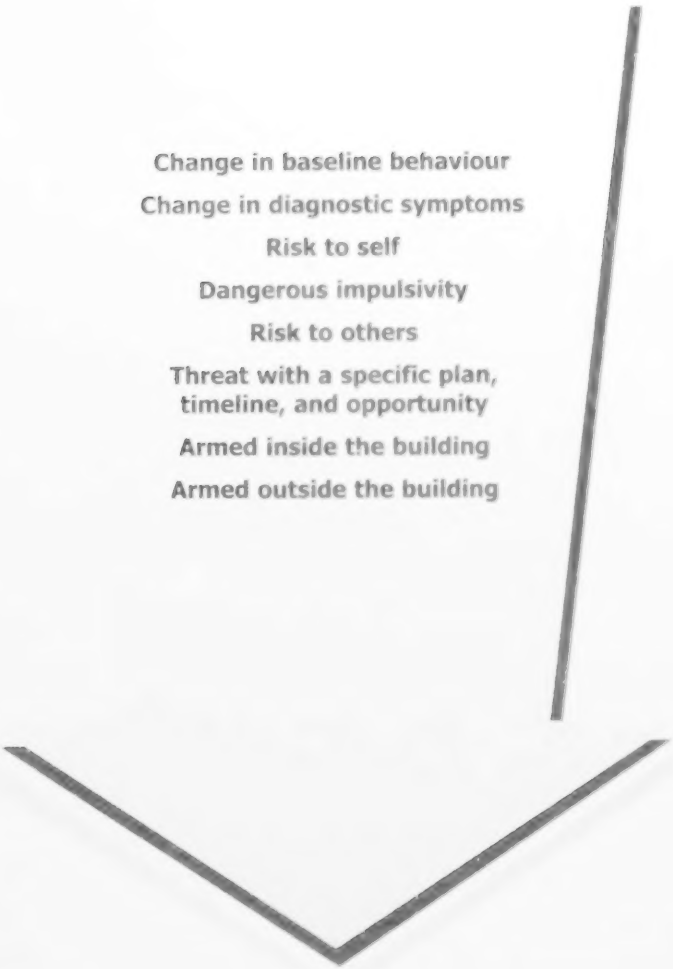

Change in baseline behaviour
Change in diagnostic symptoms
Risk to self
Dangerous impulsivity
Risk to others
Threat with a plan—no specific timeline, possible opportunity
Verbal or written threat to kill self and/or others
Internet website/MSN threats to kill others
Possession of weapons (including replicas)
Bomb threat
Fire-setting

Any threat-making behaviours are immediately reported to the principal, who activates the Threat Assessment Team to begin initial assessments of the situation.

School counsellors are usually part of the Threat Assessment Team because of their relationship of trust with students. Often, the student making the threat is known to the counsellor, who is then able to expedite the data collection component of the threat assessment process and provide support to students who have been affected by the threat.

The indicators for threat-making behaviours (as listed in the diagram to the left) are behaviours that generally breach the Criminal Code of Canada. Because of this fact, it is usually the RCMP or local police who determine whether the Threat Assessment Team will begin to intervene, or whether criminal charges will be laid.

Immediate Risk Behaviour


Change in baseline behaviour
Change in diagnostic symptoms
Risk to self
Dangerous impulsivity
Risk to others
Threat with a specific plan, timeline, and opportunity
Armed inside the building
Armed outside the building

Immediate Risk Behaviour

Change in baseline behaviour
Change in diagnostic symptoms
Risk to self
Dangerous impulsivity
Risk to others
Threat with a specific plan, timeline, and opportunity
Armed inside the building
Armed outside the building

When immediate risk behaviours are identified, dialing '911' (where available), and accessing the RCMP or the local police force is the first order of business. The principal of the school then initiates pre-established safety protocols, based on emergency preparedness plans.

The Threat Assessment Team is not involved in situations posing immediate risk. It is only once the situation is resolved, and follow-up activities are required, that the Threat Assessment Team may become involved.

In immediate risk situations, the crisis intervention team, including the school counsellor, is usually mobilized to support students who may have been traumatized by witnessing events.

Conclusion

School counsellors support students as they grow and develop. As first responders in schools for social, emotional, and behavioural issues, it is reasonable to expect that counsellors are often the first adults in the building to become aware of changes in the typical behaviour of individual students. Knowing the precursors to worrisome and/or threatening behaviour is a good first step to prevention and early intervention in the lives of young people.

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